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ABSTRACT

Noting that teachers of young children can help protect children from getting involved in violence, this booklet provides research and practice-based information on preventing violence in young children's lives. The booklet asserts that young children need to feel safe and loved, need to watch peace-loving people, need to be protected from exposure to violence, and need immediate help from adults if they are victims of violence. Suggestions for early childhood professionals for preventing violence focus on helping children handle anger. The booklet identifies several possible reasons for children's anger, presents ways teachers can model managing their own anger, delineates ways to respond to children's anger, and presents a social problem-solving approach to handling anger. Discipline strategies are also discussed, including ignoring some behaviors, using natural and logical consequences, using timeout, and spanking. The booklet then examines media influences on children's behavior, focusing on children's exposure to television violence. Cautions regarding weapons are presented. Finally, the characteristics of high quality curricula for nonviolence are described. The booklet concludes with a list of print and Web site resources for further information. (KB)

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VIOLENCE PREVENTION FOR TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

adults & children together act against violence

THE ADVERTISING COUNCIL
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VIOLENCE PREVENTION FOR TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

What a child learns about violence,
a child learns for life . . .
Teach carefully.

Almost every day, newspaper headlines and TV broadcasts tell us that violence threatens our children.

If you are like most teachers and others who take care of young children, you worry most about the children's safety. You don't want them to be exposed to violence, but in today's world, often that just isn't possible.

But **you can do something about it!** You can help protect young children from getting involved with violence, and you can increase children's chances for a safe and productive future. We can't expect very young children to protect themselves—that's *our* job. However, we *can* help them develop good relationships, knowledge and skills. And the same skills that help children avoid violence also lead them to more positive connections with others, greater success in school, and a more fulfilling life.

Early Learning is Powerful

Violent behavior is *learned*, and often it is learned early in life. But just as children can learn to be violent, they also can learn to be kind-hearted. They can learn what it means to be cared for in a loving relationship. They can learn constructive ways to solve problems, deal with disagreements, and handle anger. Children who learn these skills early in life actually are learning violence *prevention*—something that will be valuable for the rest of their lives. With these skills, children are far less likely to grow up to be violent, or to be victims of violence.

Excellent early childhood education is an investment in children's futures. As a caring professional, *you* hold a key to those futures. This booklet will give you information and suggestions based on research and the "wisdom of practice." The resource list and Web sites provided at the end of the booklet will link you to more helpful information—books, brochures, videos, and professional organizations.

Starting With the Basics: What Young Children Need

Children need to feel safe and loved. First and foremost, children need to feel physically and emotionally safe. There is no surer way to start children on the right path in life than to provide consistent, reliable, loving care. Families come first, of course, but your relationships with the children you teach are powerful tools for protecting children from violence, now and later.

Children need to watch peace-loving people. Children learn how to behave by watching people around them. Children learn by watching characters on television, in videos and in movies. They learn by watching the adults in their families and communities. And children learn by watching you—their special, beloved teacher. Think for a moment about how you react to difficult situations. How do you behave when tension builds up? When children are going wild on a rainy day? When a co-teacher has let you down? When a child has a toileting accident? When a toddler bites another child? You are teaching children, by example, how to get along in the world. When you come together with the children in your class, or with your co-workers, to solve your problems peacefully, children learn how to deal with people in a positive way. But when you or others close to the children are aggressive and destructive, children learn to act the same way.

Children need to be protected from exposure to violence. When children, even very young children, see a violent act, they are deeply affected by it. This is especially true if the violence involves a family member or someone they know in the neighborhood. As you know, children don't leave these experiences at the classroom door. What can you do to help? First, allow the children plenty of time to talk about violence they have seen at school, in the neighborhood, or on TV. Encourage them to express their feelings about it, and use pretend play and expressive art as other ways of communicating. Second, create a place of peace in your early childhood program. Make sure children get to see many more examples of people dealing with each other in friendly, cooperative ways than by threatening violence or hurting each other. The children will gradually realize that there are many ways to deal with people and resolve conflicts peacefully, and that violence is not the best way to get what they want.

Children who are victims need adult help—NOW. Teachers know from experience that children themselves are sometimes the victims of violence. A child who is being abused lives with constant fear and pain. And while the physical wounds may heal, the emotional scars can last a lifetime. Children need to count on adults to get them out of violent or abusive situations. When children believe *they* must find a solution to a problem, they often believe they *caused* the problem. No

child should carry this burden. Early childhood teachers are legally mandated to report suspected abuse. If you know of a child who is being abused, or if you think someone may be abusing a child in your care, seek help immediately. By doing so, you may save a child from unimaginable physical and emotional pain. And in the longer run, you may save that child from growing up to become a violent adult, or falling into a pattern of repeatedly being victimized.

Preventing Violence as an Early Childhood Professional

Handling anger

Everyone gets angry at times—it's part of being human. Anger is a normal feeling that can actually be helpful at times. Babies' angry cries let caregivers know something needs a change. Adults' anger about injustice may be channeled into constructive political action. So what's typical at different ages?

Young children get angry for many reasons. Children get angry for many reasons, and they show it in different ways, depending on their age and individual styles of behavior, as well as on what their family and culture encourage. As an early childhood teacher, you may recognize these typical examples:

- When babies, birth to about 9 or 10 months, feel bad—because they are hungry, sick, or in pain, or when they are startled by a loud noise—they show their anger by crying and thrashing their arms and legs. This natural response is essential to babies' survival, bringing adult attention and help.
- Older babies and toddlers, up to about 18 months, still show anger by crying and fussing (they aren't much at using words yet), but the reasons for their anger may be different. Toddlers' anger tends to flare up when they don't get an object they like, when they can't be with a favorite adult, when they are frightened, or when they feel bad because of illness. Understanding or regulating these intense feelings is still very hard for these small children.
- From about age 18 months to 4 years, many children are still easily frustrated. They may grab a toy or take a cookie away from a friend, push a child away from the place they want to stand, or hit someone who takes something away from them. At this age, it's hard for them to understand that others have feelings and rights, too.
- Children from about ages 4 to 8 gradually understand more, and they get angry about what people say, as well as what they do. They get better and better at expressing themselves in words. Instead of just thrashing around, their aggression often is aimed at hurting another person—perhaps directly,

by hitting or fighting, perhaps indirectly by damaging something the other person cares about or by hurting the relationship they have with another child ("You can't come to my birthday party!").

Children can learn to manage anger. So at every age, from birth through age 8, anger is an everyday fact of young children's lives—and therefore of your professional life. Anger is normal, but anger can also get out of control. Early childhood teachers have the challenging job of understanding and sympathizing with typical anger expressions, while also gradually teaching children effective ways of managing their anger. As young children grow, you can gradually teach these principles—not just with words, but with your actions and example:

- It's okay to be angry
- There are "okay" ways and "not okay" ways to show your anger
- It's not okay to hurt anyone, to break or throw things, or to hurt pets when you are angry
- It's okay to tell someone that you are angry
- There are ways to calm yourself when you are angry

Young children who learn to manage angry feelings are more likely to make and keep friends. Elementary school children who are constantly arguing and fighting are the ones most likely to have academic problems and to have trouble getting along with others. And these issues can later lead to quitting school, having problems with the law, and abusing alcohol and drugs.

How you can help. How can we change this pathway in the early years? Helping a young child to control angry feelings begins when **you** respond to the child's anger in a calm, respectful manner:

- Calm an infant by holding and comforting the baby, as well as removing or changing what caused the fussing.
- Encourage a toddler to use words to tell you what he or she feels, even in simple language. "I mad," or "Want doll," is a reasonable response from a little boy or girl. If the toddler can't say the words, say them yourself: "Oh, you want that doll. It makes you angry that Maria has it."
- Help preschoolers begin to learn and practice a self-calming method—taking a few deep breaths, sitting down, counting to 10, or repeating, "Be cool, be calm," for example.
- Encourage your preschool, kindergarten and elementary school children to explain what happened and how they feel (this will be easier as they get older). After a child is calm, ask what is wrong and LISTEN to the explanation,

without interrupting. Help the child think about and tell ways to change the situation that caused the anger.

Remember that the most important way to teach children how to handle anger is for *you* to show that you can calm yourself, think about your own actions, and take reasonable, nonviolent steps to change a situation that made you angry. Yelling at children, using mean, sarcastic language, or yanking at a child who is out of control—all of these are signals that your own anger has escalated to a potentially harmful level. If you have trouble controlling your temper, consider getting help through anger management training or by seeing a mental health professional. The results can help you *and* the children you teach. Also, teacher workshops and other professional resources will show you how to organize your program to encourage positive behavior and learning, so that the children are less likely to act out in ways that frustrate you.

Social problem solving. Sometimes it seems easiest just to *tell* children what to do if they have an angry conflict with another child ("Edward, you have the trike for two minutes more and then you have to give it to Adam."). But although this may work in the short run, in the longer run children will be better off if they learn to solve problems on their own. Problem solving doesn't just mean doing arithmetic or figuring out how to fix a leaky faucet. Many of the toughest problems, sometimes involving strong feelings, occur between people. Adults and children who can manage the strong feelings and resolve conflicts reasonably, without hurting someone, have good skills for *social* problem solving.

Social problem-solving can be taught. Start early to help young children STOP and THINK about different ways to solve a problem. Help them choose to act in a way that is nonviolent, safe, and fair. With support from families and teachers, at around age 3 children are usually ready to begin the simple steps of reasoning and making choices which are part of social problem solving.

As children grow, they get better at solving problems. Around age 4 or 5, most children (again with adult support) can think of more than one way to solve a problem, and they can predict how people will react to their actions. ("If I hit George when he wants my truck, he will hit me back. If we take turns, he won't grab it any more.") If you help them with words and examples, they also learn to name their own feelings and those of others. ("I am mad because Sandra won't let me on the swing." "Carlos is sad because his balloon popped.") Further, they begin to show they care about other people's feelings and well-being ("Mark, I'm sorry you hurt your knee." "Grandma will be happy when she sees the picture I colored for her.")

Children aged 6 to 8 can understand how others might see a problem differently than they do, and they can talk about a situation more clearly. They also develop a conscience and worry about rules and fairness. So as an early childhood professional,

you can develop social problem-solving skills in your program, adapting your methods to the ages and experiences of your children. Try not to expect more than young children are capable of, but also encourage children to use their good thinking and make good choices. Be sure to praise a child who does any of these things:

Calms down

Tells how he or she feels

Describes a problem

Thinks of solutions to a problem

Acts in a way that is safe, fair, and nonviolent

Make sure that your children understand that it's okay to make mistakes trying to solve problems, and that we can *all* learn from our mistakes. Always encourage children to seek help from trusted adults when a problem is too hard for them to handle.

Most of all, remember that **children learn by watching *you* solve problems** with respectful words and nonviolent actions. What small steps can you take **today**, to send this positive message in your early childhood program?

Discipline. Much challenging behavior can be prevented, if the early childhood program is well organized, appropriate and educationally effective, and truly interesting to young children. But even in the best circumstances, no child's behavior is perfect all of the time, and some children are harder to deal with than others. When you must act to stop a child's unacceptable behavior, your goal should always be to do it with self-control and without violence. The goal of discipline is to teach children *self-control,* not to punish them.

The best way to get young children to behave the way you want is to **start with a loving relationship.** Build on this foundation—**pay attention to children when things are calm,** and **comment on their good behavior.** With a large group of active young children, this can be difficult—but it does pay off. Praise children for sharing a toy with a classmate without being asked to do so, or for putting their toys away when they are finished with them, or for avoiding conflicts with other children. If children get attention only when they misbehave, they repeat the bad behavior.

Discipline is an important job for families and teachers. If a young child's behavior is constantly out of control, angry, and aggressive, this behavior can:

- Hurt that child or others
- Interfere with the child's learning and making friends
- Damage property
- Lead to school failure
- Create tension and stress at home and in school

- Set the stage for serious problems as the child grows older

You can teach children self-control by:

- Letting children see good behavior by your example
- Setting reasonable limits and rules (not too many, and involving children in developing the rules when possible)
- Having consistent, age-appropriate standards for behavior
- Having consistent consequences for misbehaving (but understanding that "bad days" happen to all of us, and that some children have special needs that require adaptations)

When young children "act up." Let children know what you expect, with simple statements and reasons.

"Please put the blocks away so that we can use the rug for our book time."

Give warnings and reminders, without threats.

"When you finish cleaning up, then we can sit down for lunch."

Tell a child *what to do* rather than what *not* to do.

"Please use a soft voice," instead of "Stop yelling!"

Follow through with praise for following instructions, or (if appropriate to the child's age and situation) consequences for not complying.

Sometimes a child's challenging behavior can be so frustrating that a parent or caregiver yanks, shakes, or strikes the child without stopping to think. Other adults may refrain from physical punishment but may hurt the child with harsh, demeaning words. Yet children become confused, scared, and angry when adults hurt them—especially the adults whom they depend on to love and protect them. And continual, harsh punishment can lead a child to become aggressive and out of control—just the opposite of what you want to accomplish.

Some discipline methods to try

Appropriate, effective discipline depends on children's ages, individual characteristic, and family and community values. Here are some suggestions that may help—and do consult the resources on this topic, found at the end of this brochure:

Try to ignore behavior that is irritating but not dangerous—for example, whining, swearing, or tantrums. It may be hard to do this, but paying attention to such behavior may just encourage more of it, because attention itself—even negative attention—is rewarding.

Natural and logical outcomes can teach lessons. When a child ignores your friendly, repeated warnings about what might happen, sometimes your best option

is to let it happen. (A child puts a few extra crackers on the floor, you warn her, she persists, another child steps on the crackers and she has none.) Of course, this should *never* be your approach when safety is at stake—for instance, when a child walks ahead of the group into the street—or when the outcome would deprive the child of needed food, rest, or learning opportunities. If a child misbehaves, respond in a way that lets the child, if old enough, see the connection between his or her action and your reaction. (A child colors on the wall, her crayons are taken away, and she helps clean the wall) Here and in every example, as the professional adult, it's your job to stay calm when you implement these discipline strategies, teaching by example and actions.

When young children are fighting or arguing, place yourself between them. If possible, kneel to get to the children's eye level. Let them know you understand that they are upset. If they are fighting over a toy or object, calmly hold the object until the problem is settled. Ask each child to tell you what is wrong, and sincerely listen to what they say. If they are old enough, ask both children to think of ways they might resolve the problem. Help them think about consequences ("If we do this, then what will happen?"), and help them choose a solution that is fair and nonviolent. Watch what happens: If it works, praise them; if not, have them choose another solution and try again.

If one child clearly has been hitting or picking on another, speak to the victim first, allowing him to say what he wants and how he feels. Encourage the victim to face the aggressor and say how he feels—perhaps something like this: "I don't like it when you push me. It hurts and makes me mad!" With younger children, you may need to help with the talking. Be sure that the aggressor doesn't get more attention than the victim.

Timeout is a method that some teachers use to give children (and adults) a short cooling off period. If you use it, keep the time short (a rule of thumb is no more than one minute for every year of a child's age), and follow these guidelines: Choose a safe, supervised place where the child can be quiet and undisturbed. Tell the child that at the end of the timeout, the two of you will talk about the troublesome behavior.

Tell the child to sit quietly, without talking to anyone, until he or she is calm and ready to have a discussion.

When timeout is over, keep your promise and talk with the child about what happened—not lecturing, but problem-solving.

About spanking. People have a variety of opinions about spanking, but the reality is that hitting or spanking children sends a confusing message. It says it's okay to hurt someone you love in order to control them or solve a problem. Repeated harshly, over time, it will train children to punish others with force—the same way that they were punished. For these reasons, most states' child care licensing regulations forbid any physical punishment in early childhood programs.

Media influences

As early childhood teachers know, media—especially television, but also videos, movies, comic books, music lyrics, and computer games—have a strong influence on children. On the one hand, such media offer powerful tools for learning and entertainment; on the other hand, violence in the media is damaging for young children. The extent of children's exposure to television violence is stunning: Violence also is a theme in many popular video and computer games for children, and new research suggests that those games may be more harmful than television and movies. Research shows that violence in the media:

- Gives children violent heroes to imitate.
- Increases mean-spirited, aggressive behavior.
- Shows children that violence is all right as a way to handle conflict.
- Makes it easy for children to ignore suffering and the bad effects of violence.
- Causes fear, mistrust, and worry (sometimes including nightmares).
- Whets their appetite for viewing more violence, in more extreme forms.

And bear in mind that even when the "good guys" win, the effects of media violence are the same As children get older, those who watch a lot of television also have lower grades, especially in reading. After all, they are substituting TV for homework, study time, reading practice, using their imagination, and interacting with others. As an early childhood professional, you can help by encouraging families to limit children's TV viewing while they are young to help prevent later problems in school.

Besides sharing your concerns with families, talk with preschoolers and older children about violence in the media. In those discussions, you can teach some important lessons:

- Violence in the media is make-believe, not real.
- Real life violence hurts people.
- Guns, bullets, knives, and other weapons on TV are fake; real weapons hurt or kill people.
- If a show is scary or confusing, talk to an adult about it.

Also teach children that violent toys may seem exciting in "pretend" games, but that real life violence is not fun. Encourage children to pretend and play in ways that don't involve violence.

Caution about weapons

A child's curiosity about weapons can be deadly. It is heartbreaking to hear of accidental shootings and serious injuries by children who handle guns or play with them. Involve families in taking actions to keep weapons away from young

children. Teach children *never* to touch a gun, bullet, or knife. Let them know that if they find one, they should not touch it, but should tell a trusted adult about it.

A curriculum for nonviolence in young children's lives

The daily experiences you provide for young children are powerful, not only for preventing violence, but also for increasing their chances to have a productive, happy life. Research shows that high quality child care programs can reduce behavior problems in later childhood and beyond.* Good programs may look different in different communities, but they have some important things in common:

- Frequent, positive interactions between adults and children, to build relationships and to support learning
- Daily activities organized around goals that are challenging but achievable for children, encouraging play and exploration combined with adults' supportive involvement
- A curriculum that is meaningful to children, building on their experiences and interests and taking them further (yes, even babies and toddlers have a curriculum—it may be very informal and individual)
- A balanced program with active and quiet activities, small and larger group work, time for vigorous large muscle play as well as use of fine muscles of fingers and hands, teacher-planned and child-initiated activities
- Careful observation of and attention to all aspects of children's development and learning: physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, cognitive, language and literacy
- Involvement of family and community members, strengthening connections with children's lives and cultures
- Many opportunities for children to learn social competence and emotion regulation by playing and learning with others, with the guidance of skilled teachers

As part of a young child's daily life, you have a critical influence on that child's development. What you teach children today will make a difference in who they are tomorrow. Early childhood professionals must use their knowledge and skills to show a path to nonviolence for children, for their families, and for the community.

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* The National Association for the Education of Young Children accredits early child programs that meet its standards. A nationwide listing of accredited programs can be found at the Association website. Information about NAEYC's accreditation criteria and the accreditation process may be found in NAEYC publications listed on the website.

This brochure was developed by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as part of the ***ACT Against Violence*** project. ***ACT—Adults and Children Together—Against Violence*** is supported by the CDC Foundation, Metropolitan Life Foundation, Center for Mental Health Services, Foundation for Child Development, Los Angeles Psychological Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The ***ACT Against Violence*** public service advertising campaign is produced in collaboration with the Advertising Council, Inc.

For more information about APA and NAEYC, and for more information about early violence prevention, go to:

http://www.apa.org

http://www.naeyc.org

http://www.actagainstviolence.org

Information and Resources

NAEYC, the American Psychological Association, and other organizations have extensive resources related to violence prevention, problem solving, discipline, and anger management. Here is a brief summary of materials and information that can help teachers, parents and others who are working to bring their community together to prevent violence before it starts. Additional resources are listed on the ACT Against Violence Website: **www.actagainstviolence.org.**

Brochures and Publications

Helping children learn self-control—an NAEYC brochure.

Raising children to resist violence: What you can do—a brochure from the American Psychological Association & American Academy of Pediatrics. Also available online at http://www.apa.org/pi/pii/raisingchildren.html

Love and learn: Positive guidance for young children, by Dr. Alice Honig—an NAEYC brochure.

Early violence prevention: Tools for teachers of young children, by Dr. Ronald Slaby & others—an NAEYC publication.

NAEYC position statement on violence in the lives of children. Available online at http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psviol98.htm.

NAEYC position statement on media violence in children's lives. Available online at http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psmevi98.htm

Media violence and children: A guide for parents—an NAEYC brochure.

Controlling anger before it controls you—from the American Psychological Association. Available online at http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/anger.html

Discipline: Appropriate guidance of young children—an NAEYC video.

For materials listed above that are not available online, you can call NAEYC or APA to order copies:

NAEYC Resource Sales Office: **202-232-8777, ext. 2001**

APA Public Interest Office: **202-336-6046**

Web Sites

ACT Against Violence: **http://www.actagainstviolence.org**

American Psychological Association: **http://www.apa.org**

Center for Media Education: **http://www.cme.org**

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: **http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/**

Children's Defense Fund: **http://www.childrensdefense.org**

Committee for Children: **http://www.cfchildren.org/**

National Association for the Education of Young Children: **http://www.naeyc.org**

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: **http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/**

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information: **http://www.calib.com/nccanch/**

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse: **http://www.childabuse.org/**

National Institute on Media and the Family: **http://www.mediaandthefamily.com**

ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families: **http://www.zerotothree.org**